

SARHWU - problems and advances since the 1987 strike

RENEE ROUX traces the progress of SARHWU over the past 18 months, focusing on the remarkable victories won in railway strikes in Natal during 1988.

There has been much speculation and rumour over the last eight months about problems in SARHWU. There has not, however, been any analysis of the enormous organisational obstacles faced by the union. Nor has there been any analysis of its progress since the 1987 strike.

In February, the leadership of railway workers, as delegated to SARHWU's national congress, firmly asserted the need for maximum unity in their ranks if their goals are to

be reached. This was one of the greatest victories for SARHWU members and their organisation in the past two years. They have learned through experience that when there are different views in an organisation, which is often the case, these should never be allowed to impede progress.

The 1987 strike

On the 23rd March 1987 Johannesburg railway workers downed tools, demanding

**South African
Railway and Harbour
Workers Union**



An injury to one is an injury to all

the reinstatement of a dismissed colleague. A week later more than 20,000 workers were out on strike. Thus began the 2 1/2 month battle between SARHWU and S.A. Transport Services (SATS), the giant state-controlled corporation that runs the harbours and airways, the railways and pipelines, and much of the country's road transport.

Reporting on the aftermath of the strike, the author of a *Labour Bulletin* article ended off rather gloomily:

"What appeared to be a victory for workers, turned out to be a state ploy to intensify harassment while at the same time maintaining the operation of SATS. The state intends to establish a stable working environment through destruction of the union's worker leadership. The reluctance to recognise SARHWU is a stubborn attempt to force workers to accept the Black Trade Union (BLATU)"¹.

This article accurately described what was happening at the time, and what was to come. The union was to experience harassment, collusion between SATS management and the Security Police, and leadership problems. What the article could not predict was the enormous resilience of SATS workers and their willingness to endure extreme hardship in order finally to "tame" their bosses.

Determined to prevent a strong public sector union emerging, the state launched a campaign against SARHWU. No doubt it was also concerned that privatisation should proceed smoothly in the transport sector. The events during the strike are

well-known: workers were detained, evicted from hostels, shot dead in Germiston and Johannesburg, and besieged in COSATU offices by armed police. These actions and SATS' absolute refusal to negotiate, led to a spiral of violence and counter-violence.

Never before has a union been subjected to such systematic propaganda attacks aimed at smearing its entire leadership, which the state stopped just short of putting on trial. The lengthy detention of the leadership and the 150 court cases involving over 1,000 SARHWU activists were designed to disorganise if not to crush the union. The attack on SARHWU was extended into an attack on COSATU itself, culminating in the siege and then bombing of COSATU House.

The detention of experienced worker leadership was a severe blow. The lack of formal recognition, which enables union officials or other union members to service workers, was a particular problem. It was extremely hard to consolidate union structures. The union has throughout been forced to collect subscriptions by hand. This stretches resources and limits the income of the union.

But what the state strategists did not realise, swallowed up as they were in their own propaganda of "provocation, instigation and intimidation", was that the mass militancy displayed from the onset of the strike was born out of decades of the most oppressive conditions. The spirit of liberation instilled by the strike and its



SARHWU members on a station platform during the 1987 strike

Photo: Santu Mofokeng/Afrapix

overwhelming victory was not going to be crushed away. At the end of the strike it was possibly only the workers who were not surprised by their victory, and this confidence has stayed with them.

The strike won the right for workers to resign from BLATU. It won de facto recognition that SARHWU members have the right to be represented by democratically elected shopstewards. According to SARHWU: "Ultimately, the most far-reaching political gain from the 1987 strike was that it forced SATS management to recognise democratically elected worker representatives." It is the first time that black workers in the state transport sector have won this right.

Despite the strains of such a big

and lengthy strike workers remained loyal to unity and built on the advances made during the strike. They had proven to themselves that they could wield enormous power.

National tasks after the Johannesburg strike

It is no wonder that the leadership of SARHWU refers to the past two years as a period of adapting and orientation to enormous changes and challenges. Not only was the union faced with the strike and state repression, it also had to cope with new organisational tasks.

The strike forced SATS in the southern Transvaal to recognise that it had to deal with SARHWU, and therefore also to take workers more

seriously. But this was not the end of SARWHU's problems. The union had to become a national force to address the needs of railway workers. By fighting to extend the gains of the strike to other regions the union could gain a foothold. But recognition of committees would not be a substitute for the recognition of the union, for an agreement which would provide workers and officials with negotiated procedures, and for stop-order facilities.

In October 1986 SATS employed 207,221 workers nationally.² Of these 95,305 were African workers.

After the strike SARHWU had a membership of approximately 25,000, mainly in southern Transvaal. SATS had no intention of recognising SARHWU at the time, and therefore did not clarify its position on recognition.

As time went on however, it became clear that at the very least SATS would require SARHWU to represent a majority of workers nationally in a particular racial category, as well as and register under the Labour Relations Act, before it would recognise the union. Even then it would only recognise SARHWU in respect of African workers.

As SARWHU's membership grew in other regions, the rights won through the strike in Transvaal were not automatically extended to SARHWU members elsewhere. SARHWU was going to have to fight for these rights step by step in each region.

After the strike SATS still thought that, with the help of propaganda,

SARHWU could be contained and crushed in Transvaal. The state corporation believed that SARHWU would never become the majority union in SATS, and particularly not in Natal. This hope was also based on that widely held ideology that workers in Natal are essentially more conservative than anywhere else. SATS did everything to prop up the more "respectable" of BLATU leadership in Natal in order to ward off SARHWU. For SATS Natal was a critical area because of its strategic position: Natal has a high concentration of railway and harbour workers, and Durban is the country's main export harbour.

Explosion of SARHWU membership

The problems of not being formally recognised were made even worse when membership soared after the 1987 strike. More and more demands were placed on the available leadership, and on the structures and resources of the union.

The membership in southern Transvaal alone trebled within 3 months in 1987, from 8,000 to 22,000. In Natal SARHWU membership grew from 2,000 to 15,000 in about nine months; the national membership shot up from about 9,000 at the time of the strike to at least 43,000 at the end of 1988, with many more workers pushing to be signed up.

It was not only the rate of growth that brought enormous difficulties, but also the nature of the growth. Up till today, the growth in most regions has

been the result of a sudden explosion of anger and frustration, when workers realise that SARHWU can provide a powerful alternative to the "Bosses' sweetheart, BLATU". This was the case in Natal and East London and to some extent in Kimberley. One shop steward comments:

" Sometimes we did not know our head from our elbow, and seemed to be bumping both everywhere. Each skirmish with the bosses brought members pouring in; still our officials did not have access, and we could not represent our members."

Since the 1987 strike it is only in the smaller outlying areas of the Northern Cape, Western Cape, Northern Transvaal and Northern Natal, that the union has actually had to go out and recruit members. In these areas it was able to avoid growing too fast for the available resources and existing structures.

In addition, unlike most of the other industrial unions, SARHWU only established a real foothold in its sector after the formation of CO-SATU. This was a mixed blessing. While it gave organisation a boost it also put more pressure on the union. The consciousness and expectations of workers are very different today, compared to when the progressive trade union movement emerged. "The truth is that since its formation, many workers say that they are "joining CO-SATU" rather than an affiliate. They are usually under the illusion that their union is this enormous powerful organisation with endless resources," says a SARHWU organiser.

A national union overnight

The explosion of membership has also turned the union overnight into a national organisation with branches across the country. The union has had to develop national structures and identify national priorities. To accomplish this, the union has to accommodate the different backgrounds, strengths and weaknesses of each region and distribute resources appropriately.

Building and consolidating organisation after rapid growth is one of the most difficult tasks facing the trade union movement and in fact all mass organisation. Such a period creates enormous strain. It is especially difficult when this growth involves becoming a national organisation for the first time. Many unions have suffered in the process of trying to adapt to similar conditions; for example MAWU in 1983, FAWU after the 1986 merger, and CCAWUSA in 1987. SARHWU has been facing exactly the same challenges over the past two years.

Natal workers - inspired by Transvaal strike

Inspired by the victories of their Transvaal comrades, SARHWU members in Durban, who numbered about 1,000 at the time of the 1987 strike, set about recruiting with more confidence in the last half of 1987. By January 1988 they had signed up about 3,000 members. But SATS management refused to process their

resignations from BLATU, or to recognise representatives elected by SARHWU members. Workers were afraid to be left without any representation.

But there was no doubt that workers were tired of BLATU. Unrecognised as they were, SARHWU shop stewards were better able to feel the mood of the workers and act in their defence. An example was the stoppage at Point, a section of Durban harbour. Point has historically been a centre of organisation of railway workers in the harbour as well as of stevedores, who are members of Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU).

On one particular payday in February 1988, SATS deducted, without any consultation, an amount of money from every workers' pay packet. They claimed that workers had been paid too much bonus since 1986. BLATU kept quiet. Even though this only amounted to approximately R30 out of the wages of the black workers, and R90 out of white artisans' wages, SARHWU members initiated discussions amongst the workers. Very soon the whole harbour came to a standstill, apart from the little that the artisans could continue doing alone. Within three hours the pay truck returned and everyone, including the artisans, was refunded.

This victory gave massive impetus for people to join SARHWU and even the white workers warmed towards the union. Dumisane Mathonsi, treasurer of SARHWU Durban branch comments:

"Many of the white workers respect us now. I have been told that over and over by Mr. Marx, a member of SALSTAFF. But they are scared and loyal to their nationalist ideology. We are making breakthroughs, that is why I believe they transferred a particular driver to NuPier, to get him away from me."

However, the problems were the same as those experienced by Johannesburg workers a year earlier: the management and BLATU would not process resignations, and would not recognise SARHWU shop stewards or the union officials.

In an NEC of the union in April 1988, workers had resolved to launch a resignation campaign, and this gave rise to a concerted effort by the Durban branch. A court application was made on behalf of one worker, Temba Pakkies, who had been trying in vain to resign for some time. Although the hope was that his case would set a precedent, only Pakkies's resignation was processed and his monies refunded. The union did not have the resources to lodge a legal application on behalf of each member.

Workers were extremely angry when they heard this. They downed tools on 24 June 1988, demanding to see the BLATU Regional Chairperson, Mr. M.J. Mithiyane. He soon came and was told by at least 5,000 workers that they "want SARHWU" and want to resign from BLATU because it "*favourishe abaqashi*", while he himself had promised them "heaven and earth".

When management approached

WORKERS AND DISPUTES

BLATU : IMPROVEMENTS

PROGRESSED A LONG WAY DURING HARD BARGAINING WITH MINISTER AND MANAGEMENT ON A NUMBER OF VERY IMPORTANT ISSUE. ANNOUNCEMENTS WILL BE MADE BY BLATU IN THE VERY NEAR FUTURE.

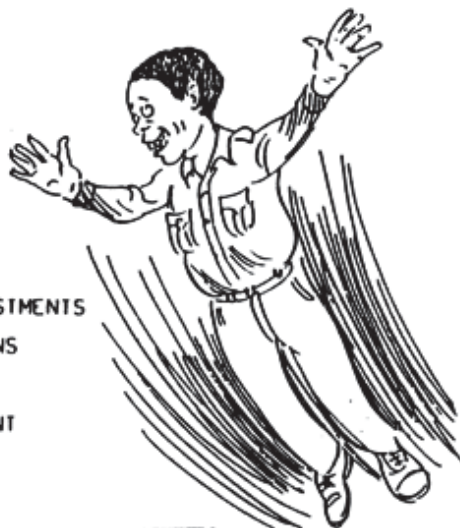


SARHWU: DESTRUCTION



STRIKES STRIKES.....
DISMISSALS UNEMPLOYMENT...
LOSS OF HOUSES POVERTY
MISERY HUNGER.....

- a) EMPLOYMENT
- b) SECURITY
- c) ADVANCEMENT
- d) SALARY ADJUSTMENTS
- e) HOUSING LOANS
- f) ASSISTANCE
- g) REINSTATEMENT



SARHWU : NO FUTURE

PREVENT SELF-DESTRUCTION — GO BACK TO WORK.

BLATU propoganda made many claims regarding what the structure could do for workers, but they have never done anything substantial to back up their claims

Pamphlet: Courtesy of SARHWU

he workers to return to work, they said that they had no problem, as long as resignation forms were prepared for them to sign. Both Mithiyane and management solemnly promised that the workers would be allowed to resign. By this time however workers were well-seasoned and insisted on seeing the forms before returning to work. Within three hours, forms were prepared, resignations commenced, and SARHWU returned to work.

In that month, at least 4,000 workers resigned from BLATU and SARHWU's membership shot up to 6,000. In fact the union says that it has not been able to keep up with resignations, so that while 15,000 workers in Natal have resigned from BLATU, they have only been able to sign up 13,000.

A long struggle followed with BLATU trying to win members back. One of the tools they attempted using was blatant propaganda BLATU alleged:

- that SARHWU is not prepared to negotiate, only to strike;
- that SARHWU is not recognised, and therefore cannot negotiate;
- that BLATU will remain the majority in the region and nationally, and SARHWU will not be recognised because SATS only recognises one union per "racial" sector;
- that SARHWU is "pro-ANC" (BLATU leadership was present at the launch of UWUSA in 1986, and had expressed interest in affiliating);
- that SARHWU was "pro-disinvestment", and would cause

workers to lose their jobs.

This propaganda did appeal to some of the hard-line Inkatha supporters. However, SARHWU had already adopted an attitude in Natal and elsewhere of not engaging in conflict with BLATU, but rather trying to speak to their members and focus on the needs of all SATS workers. This approach obviously paid off, as not even these strong Inkatha supporters resigned from SARHWU. The need to keep them in the union did however pose constant challenges, which only served to make the leadership and majority members more determined to win recognition and fight for the rights of all employed by SATS. On the other hand the progress of SARHWU was weakening the unity of the leadership of BLATU. "There were the pro-COSATU and pro-UWUSA groups within the BLATU Regional Management Committee. Mr Mo-shoeshoe was one of those who were pro-COSATU and he is now a member of SARHWU," says a SARHWU office-bearer.

Living wage campaign

SARHWU members in Durban were very excited when the April 1988 National Executive Committee decided to launch a campaign to fight the wage freeze. After extensive consultation, the August NEC pinned the living wage demand at R1,500 per month. The union is barred from negotiating in the SATS Labour Council and thereby participating in the system of wage arbitration at SATS. But

WORKERS AND DISPUTES

it was confident that by drawing the support of more and more workers for a demand of R1,500, it could push SATS to pay more than what was awarded by the arbitrator.

Shop stewards and officials carried the message of the Living Wage Campaign throughout Natal. In the process of building the campaign, membership grew throughout the region, and structures were established. In Durban, four branches were formed, including Umzinto in the south and Stanger in the north. Other branches were established in Kokstad, Ladysmith, Empangeni/Richards Bay and most recently Pietermaritzburg. Membership grew in the process, even though areas such as Richards Bay and Pietermaritzburg were still very weak. Each branch sends two delegates to the Regional Executive Committee (REC), which meets regularly.

Unfair dismissals spark off regional strike

One of the main issues on the agenda at meetings of all structures was unfair dismissals, and the lack of negotiated grievance and disciplinary procedures. In addition an NEC in September had given impetus for the union to step up its campaigns for recognition and a living wage in SATS. It was two unfair dismissals that

sparked a stoppage in Durban on 19th September, which by the 21st had spread to Stanger, Ladysmith, Kokstad, Empangeni/Richards Bay and Umzinto. In addition, East London workers had just initiated strike action over the dismissal of workers as well as on the living wage demands of the union.



These actions pre-empted national action on the living wage and recognition demands, and did place new strains on the union. As it turned out, however, they prepared the Natal region to play an important role, together with other regions, in welding the union together when it was threatened with division.

The history of these two dismissals was as follows: in the first case, a worker named Lupindo was assaulted some months before by a white supervisor named Cloete. He laid a charge, and presented medical certificates to the inspector at Point, with the hope that disciplinary action would be taken. Nothing happened, until a second quarrel erupted between the two. This time Lupindo was quicker on his feet and threw the first punch. He was immediately suspended without pay and dismissed when the magistrate's court found him guilty of assault. Workers were angry about what was clearly preferential treatment, when in fact the two were now "quits". The second unfair dismissal took place at

Durban station. Colin Sibiya was dismissed when a cloakroom attendant under his supervision lost funds.

Accumulated anger about these two cases, led to workers downing tools on 19 September. Their demand was unconditional reinstatement of both Lupindo and Sibiya.

Most of the offensive by SATS and the state was focused on Durban, where at least 16,000 of the roughly 20,000 black workers in the region are concentrated. On the second day SATS and the police tried to break the strike. Four hundred workers were arrested as they moved from their clock-in points to various meeting places. Seeing that workers were not intimidated, SATS asked to meet with representatives, ie. SARHWU shop stewards. They were told that no meeting would take place until workers were released, and before the end of the day this demand was met.

On the third day workers were tear-gassed. The explanation from SATS was that workers were sabotaging the cranes, which were being operated by white artisans. Again workers were not afraid and demanded that this harassment should cease if any settlement was to be reached. On the same day SATS agreed to reinstate the two workers, and agreed to give a written guarantee that this would be immediate and unconditional.

Workers turn to larger issues

When Lupindo and Sibiya returned, however it was not to work, but to join the strike. To workers the

unfair dismissals were clearly only symptoms of the larger issues - that the union and shop stewards were not recognised and that they were forced to be represented by BLATU which was worse than useless. As a result workers resolved to continue their strike, demanding that SARHWU and shop stewards be recognised, and that BLATU must no longer be involved in any representations or negotiations on behalf of SARHWU members.

Workers also wanted SARHWU to put forward their wage demands. BLATU was clearly doing nothing concrete on the issue of wages and the government's freeze apart from submitting it to arbitration under the system designed by the government to suppress wages. This meant simply awaiting the arbitrator's decision at the end of September. The majority of workers were at that point earning a measly R337.50 per month. On the other hand workers had over the months begun to fully understand and support the demand for R1,500. Soon this became the main demand of the strike.

Workers were also inspired to continue their strike by the fact that in East London SARHWU members had not yet won their demand for the reinstatement of the dismissed worker.

Management was surprised that workers were still out on 21 September, despite the written undertakings to reinstate the two workers, and even more surprised that they could not push cargo out through Richards Bay. Richards Bay had joined the strike after a few days. SARHWU assistant

WORKERS AND DISPUTES

general secretary, David Moeti³, who was regional secretary in Natal at the time, recalls:

"In fact, we were very weak in the Empangeni/Richards Bay area, with only a few strong members. But when the workers found that the bosses were forcing them to work overtime because their fellow-workers in Durban had closed the harbour, they joined the strike."

Management met a committee elected by the SARHWU REC, and although wage arbitration was not complete said that it would probably be 12%, which is in fact exactly what it turned out to be. Shop stewards reported this news to workers, who in turn re-iterated their demand for R1,500 per month.

At this point management issued an ultimatum to return to work by 4.30 p.m. on 22 September. Workers were evicted from their hostels. Whenever they gathered, they were accompanied by large contingents of armed police on the ground and in hovering helicopters. SATS also obtained a Supreme Court interdict confirming that the strike was illegal and that the workers could be legally dismissed.

First negotiations: SARHWU wins wage increase

Seeing that the workers were unflinching, SATS management for the very first time agreed to meet with a SARHWU delegation, including shop stewards and two head office officials. The agreement reached between 25

and 26 September showed how vulnerable SATS can be and how quickly they could exercise their "managerial discretion". Even before the arbitrator ruled for a 12% increase, management offered 19.5%, and agreed to implement this nationally. SATS management also agreed to afford Natal shop stewards the same recognition enjoyed in southern Transvaal, and for the first time conceded that it would recognise SARHWU, as long as the union registered. Further they agreed that no worker would be disciplined or victimised for participating in the strike and that there would be another national meeting.

An agreement was signed on 27 September and workers returned to work on the 28th. The strike had lasted for 9 days. Although they were by no means satisfied with what had been agreed, they were confident that the union was poised to take up the demand for full recognition and R1,500 per month at a national level. During the strike, SARHWU had become the majority union in the region and this added to their confidence that their struggle for recognition was nearly over.

When workers learned that over 1,800 of their East London comrades had been dismissed on the 7th day of a strike which concerned the same grievances, and contrary to the undertaking that strikers would not be victimised, they were even more determined that the union should act speedily to defend them.

The reasons for SATS's intransigence in East London while settling

in Durban will not be dealt with here, but they obviously exploited the fact that the SARHWU membership was smaller (about 2,000) at the time of the strike. Management's hand was also strengthened by the division that still existed between SARHWU and the National Union of Railway Workers (NURW) in East London and Port Elizabeth, as well as the massive unemployment in the region. Ships destined for East London were easily diverted to Port Elizabeth.

The dismissals that followed the strike in East London also turned out to be a disguised form of rationalisation and retrenchment. In the months that followed, almost 1,500 were re-employed on a selective basis; the criteria that were used were almost ex-

clusively age and health as determined by the SATS doctors. With no recourse to the Labour Relations Act and the industrial courts, the workers were unable to challenge these unfair dismissals.

Problems in national co-ordination

Natal delegates to the SARHWU national congress on 9 - 10 October 1988, expected to find equal enthusiasm. They wanted to bring to a head the campaigns of the year and plan for national united action for a living wage and for recognition of SARHWU. They were also determined to secure the reinstatement of the East London workers. They were surprised



SARHWU (S TvI) regional meeting - discussing the problems and challenges facing the union

Photo: Labour Bulletin

to find that there were problems and division in their union and that there was no unity when it came to electing their national leadership.

According to SARHWU leaders it was clear at the time that the union needed to unite and consolidate their membership. A common national programme was needed to address the immediate needs of SATS workers, as well as a longer term strategy to build a powerful union.

For eighteen months most of the energies and resources of the union had been tied up with the legal defence of its members. With the cases tapering off, the union again had to face its main organisational tasks, and these were becoming more and more complex as the union grew in size. At the time of the congress this realisation had not filtered through all the structures. The differences that emerged in the congress were not ideological but the absence of a common understanding on the way forward. As a result, delegates left the congress without much discussion on the concrete details of the national campaign, other than a date for possible action at the end of October.

National talks break down

The weeks that followed saw increasing tensions in the union. In the words of Mathonsi, the Durban treasurer:

"It was clear to many that the union was not in a position to co-ordinate protracted national action in all the centres."

Natal goes it alone

In spite of this the Natal region decided to go ahead with their action, and on 28 October workers downed tools throughout Natal. The reasons for continuing action in Natal are complex, but in short:

- The union had built up a momentum and mass support during the past 10 months. It had only recently gained mass support through the struggles described above. Had it not taken the action workers expected, the union risked losing this support.
- Most of the membership in Natal were new and inexperienced; they would have been demoralised if they were dragged into problems which originated in other regions.
- Workers' expectations and demands were becoming more complex, and these had to be tabled to management.
- From an early stage, SATS management were aware that the worker leadership were under pressure and therefore vulnerable to manipulation.

On 26 October Mathonsi was called into the regional SATS office by the Port Manager. He was asked whether it was true that a second strike was being planned. When Mathonsi denied knowledge of such a plan, he was offered "food, whisky and nice accommodation", if "we can work together". When this bribery was reported to the workers, it added fuel to the fire.

The striking workers were immediately confronted with strong-arm tactics: they were reminded of the interdict and told that their meeting on SATS property was illegal in terms of the State of Emergency. They were told to work or disperse, and chose to disperse. From Monday 31 October until the end of the strike workers met in different halls around Durban. Throughout the strike there was a massive police presence, and at one stage helicopters were literally chasing workers around the streets of Durban.

On 31 October 3 shop-stewards were delegated by the region to meet management. The management delegation included Van Vuuren, the National Director of Labour Relations for SATS. From the start, the union clarified that its demands combined local, regional and national demands, and these were tabled:

1. A national minimum wage of R1,500 per month.
2. The recognition of SARHWU.
3. Extensive revision of the present disciplinary procedure.
4. Provision of equal medical aid benefits to all SATS workers.
5. Immediate implementation of pay parity at all levels.
6. Equal pension benefits to all SATS workers.
7. Recognition of the people's holidays as paid public holidays, i.e., 1 May, 16 June, 16 December and 22 April (the anniversary of the 1987 dismissals and shootings of SARHWU members, which failed to break the strike).

8. Six months maternity leave for women workers.

9. Two weeks paternity leave for men where applicable.

10. Information on the hourly rates of pay.

11. Pay workers for 6-8 June stayaway and cease threatening disciplinary action.

12. Clarify the relationship between SATS, BLATU and Old Mutual.

13. Transkei/Bophutatswana/Venda/Ciskei citizens must be appointed to permanent staff.

14. Hours of duty of all SATS workers must be the same.

15. Reinstate the dismissed East London workers.

Management was clearly bargaining on the knowledge that Natal might remain alone in this strike, and kept referring to discussions with the NEC of SARHWU and "future developments between SATS and SARHWU nationally" to undermine the representatives. Most of the demands raised remained unanswered or were claimed to be "national issues". Management refused to discuss the dismissals, "because the East London issue is a matter which can only be discussed in East London"⁴.

When it became clear to the leadership that other regions were not likely to join the strike, they reluctantly had to convince members to return to work until the problems of co-ordination could be sorted out. According to shop stewards and officials "Workers were quite bitter and unhappy, but we managed to cool them off. Eventually

we went back united."

Workers unite SARHWU

SARHWU called a special national congress on 25 February 1989, in order to resolve the crisis that was paralysing the union. It is not surprising that all regions urged the need to stand solidly behind the leadership that carried majority support, in an effort to build maximum unity. Natal had supported a minority position in the September conference. Now their delegation asserted: "Whatever one's individual preferences are, there is no way to build an organisation into a fighting tool other than through recognition of the will of the majority at a particular moment in time." Through holding this position, Natal region became a force for unity.

During the second half of 1988 SARHWU had been unable to take effective national action. Although the NEC decided on campaigns such as the resignation campaign, the Living Wage Campaign and the recognition campaign, tensions in the union prevented the campaigns from developing. At the same time, the absence of effective campaigns and direction worsened the tensions.

It was only in the Natal region that leadership managed to mobilise around campaigns that were supposed to be national. This strengthened the region. But it also showed Natal workers that they could not progress alone. They needed the backing of a national union and a national struggle if they were going to make any pro-

gress against SATS. It was this experience of the power of their campaigning, and of the weakness caused by division, that made the Natal region a force for unity at the congress.

The fact that all SARHWU members faced a common employer probably made unity easier to attain than in a union facing several hundred different companies. Still the struggle to unify SARHWU has lessons for other unions. Ongoing campaigns and momentum are needed. These give direction to the union, and develop and nurture layers of leadership with a national perspective, and leadership which is close to the ground. Without a programme of campaigns and action, there is a danger that the organisation will turn in on itself and experience destructive conflict.

On the other hand national leadership needs to be as flexible and accommodating as it is decisive and united. Organisation and struggle cannot always progress according to a blue-print, and there are many aspects which leadership cannot easily forecast or control.

The way forward

The tasks that face SARHWU are more enormous than two years ago, but the union is confident that it is ready to meet the challenges. The struggle to consolidate organisation in the regions and nationally will continue, as will the fight for union recognition and a living wage.

While SARHWU does not agree



that registration of the union should be a pre-requisite for recognition, the National Congress of October 1988 took a decision to register. The union knows that BLATU and the registrar are bound to make this difficult, and is preparing itself on various levels.

The union vice-president, Johnny Potgieter, says: "SATS wants one union per 'racial' group, and we will have another battle to admit all workers and be registered as a non-racial union for the transport services. But SARHWU is set to win mass support from the members of the coloured, Indian and white staff associations, and will also take on this challenge."

The Workers' Summit and the public sector

The main task of all the unions in the public sector are to secure the fundamental rights of workers in the sector: security of employment, permanent status and access to all benefits. In order to achieve this they need to win recognition, the right to representation, stop orders and collec-

tive bargaining rights.

Like other public sector unions, SARHWU is enthusiastic about the campaign against the present Labour Relations Act that came out of the workers summit, particularly the demand for state, agricultural and domestic workers to be included in the Act. The campaign will hopefully strengthen the alliance of unions within the public sector.

But while SARHWU is spearheading struggles in the dragon-head of the public sector, there is a growing realisation that the responsibility for all these crucial political tasks cannot be left to them, or even to the group of public sector unions. For too long organisations have been plagued with attitudes of "we are better" or "see, they are making a mess of it".

The major tasks of the labour movement now are to organise the public sector, the farms and the domestic sector. These are crucial sectors and they are the most difficult to organise. But the leadership in these unions has often had less experience, while experienced activists are concentrated in the well-established unions in the private sector. The lessons and styles of organisation gained from the progress of unions in the relatively far-sighted private corporations do not necessarily apply directly to the struggles in the public, farming or domestic sectors. But despite this, experiences and resources need to be shared. The struggle in the public sector should be the responsibility of COSATU, of progressive organisations dealing in the public sector, and

of the mass democratic movement as a whole. ☆

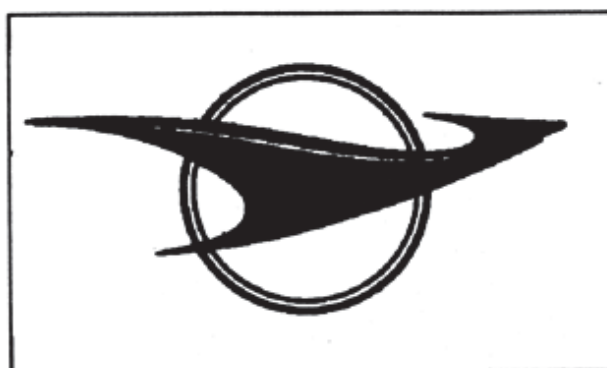
S.A. Transport Services

There is no doubt that SATS occupies an extremely strategic position in the economy. Not only does it monopolise the transport of goods by sea, air and pipeline, but it also transports a large proportion of the country's workers to and from their workplaces. Latest figures indicate that SATS's share of the road and rail goods transport market has dropped to 17%⁵.

While the harbour and pipeline divisions are the most profitable, and in fact subsidise the other divisions, on the whole SATS has been a drain on state resources. According to SARHWU this is due at least in part to mismanagement.

Transport has always been one of the major items on the budget allocation within the "Economic Service" function, and increased by 30% between 1985/6 and 1987/88. Thus in 1987/88, the transport allocation was R2,119,677,000, which was more than a third of the total Economic Services allocation of R6,248,468,000.

The SATS board is made up of the Minister of Trans-



port and 3 Commissioners appointed by him, and it reports directly to the State President. As a state corporation under the ultimate control of the Nationalist government, SATS has historically focused on keeping the costs of black wages down and maintaining sheltered employment for whites. Between 1980 and 1986 SATS reduced its workforce by 22%. Even with these massive redundancies, white workers' jobs were protected, as the Table 1 shows.

Control of workers.

The system of labour control over SATS workers, and particularly of African workers, is complex and severe. It has only been challenged by the General Workers Union in Port Elizabeth during 1982 and now by SARHWU. Essential elements of the

Table 1

	1975	1980	1986
African	117,775	126,176	95,305
Coloured	18,865	24,428	16,415
Indian	1,745	1,840	1,588
White	111,844	113,950	93,913
Total	250,209	266,403	207,221

(CSS 1987 Labour Statistics D1. D6)

system have been:

1. Strict racial division of workers;
2. Strict division of representation along lines of job category, through one of the 9 in-company staff associations;
3. Maintaining the majority of African workers at casual status, and therefore making them subject to a 24-hour notice period with no right to representation;
4. The hostel system which accommodates the majority of African workers;
5. Denial of workers' rights to freely associate with the union of their choice;
6. Exclusion from the scope of the Labour Relations Act, no recourse to the Industrial Courts, and the banning of strikes;
7. Total co-option of the leadership of staff associations to serve the bosses' interests. As one worker put it in 1982 when BLATU was hit by mass resignations in Port Elizabeth: "BSA (BLATU) is a SATS toy. It is like Sebe or Matanzima. The officials of the BSA are people who are employed to blind workers, for the workers not to know their rights. They are paid much higher wages than the workers. They really represent the interests of the railway authorities."⁶

A few weeks later General Workers Union (GWU) members embarked on a go-slow in Port Elizabeth harbour, demanding the recognition of their union. They were dismissed two days later. The then Minister of Transport, Schoemann, tried to justify the system of repression

at SATS, and more specifically, why SATS said that workers had "dismissed themselves":

"It is necessary to point out that workers in SATS are not just workers in the strategic infrastructure service, but are also in the true sense workers from the state-controlled operation. As such these workers enjoy extraordinary above average conditions of service such as security of employment (SIC!) but on the other hand they are not allowed to strike."⁷

Commenting on why SATS was insensitive to the appeals by other influential employers that they should recognise unions independently of their internal system of labour relations, the General Secretary of GWU said:

"Because they're so powerful. And why they are so powerful is because they control the transport section of the country in an unprecedented way.... That makes them an institution of enormous power. Bosses are scared of them. Government is scared of them. And that's why they managed to remain impervious....It was really a situation that made David and Goliath look like a cakewalk for David."⁸

Ultimately the 1982 strike failed because it was confined to one harbour. In addition the Port Elizabeth harbour is not very strategic and was particularly slack at that time. As a result it became clear that any union that was going to breakthrough in one such a strategic sector, was going to need a national presence and a national strategy.

New laws at SATS

In the wake of the 1987 SARHWU strike the commissioners amended the SATS Conditions of Employment and in September 1988 these became law. What these amendments did was to make the SATS dispute procedure appear more democratic, thereby propping up the recognised staff associations. On the other hand, they still hope to permanently exclude SARHWU from participation.

The regulations makes provision for the establishment of conciliation boards to which any group of workers can refer grievances. In principal this means that SARHWU members can also refer grievances, but in practice SATS can refuse to appoint such a board.

The Bill also makes provision for a collective bargaining forum called a Labour Council, which resembles industrial councils. All recognised unions/staff associations may be represented, but only if a 3/4 majority of the Council accepts the union. SATS hopes hereby to exclude SARHWU from the council even if it is forced to recognise the union.

In addition, the new regulation still outlaws strikes and excludes "casual" and "contract" workers from participating in any of these new forums. ☆

Threat of privatisation

Like other unions in the public sector, SARHWU is facing the threat of privatisation by a management that is not prepared to negotiate. The pressure of not being able to negotiate on when, how and under what conditions the process of privatisation is going to take place has put enormous strains on the union.

General Secretary, Martin Sebakwane, says that rationalisation and redundancies are taking place as SATS tries to make itself more attractive to the private sector. In the Durban harbour, a coal-loading department was sold off to Rennie's and at the Koedoespoort foundry, white workers are now doing unskilled work. Redundancies are not being negotiated and take place in "unseen"

Table 2

	1986	1987	1988	% decline 1987-8
AFRICAN	95,305	85,425		6%
COLOURED	16,415	14,898		8,3%
INDIAN	1,588	1,566		0,2%
WHITE	93,913	82,633		6,9%
TOTAL	207,221	198,980	184,522	6,5%

(CSS, 1987, Labour Statistics; Commission of Administration, June 1988.)

ways. The rate of dismissals is increasing and vacancies are not filled; workers are pushed to take ill-health and early retirement.

According to SARHWU, SATS confidently claims that privatisation is not going to have a drastic effect and talks about there being no visible effect for at least three years. But Table 1 above showed the employment figures up to 1986, and the situation has only worsened, as can be seen in Table 2 (See previous page)

SATS is also saying that privatisation is not going to change labour relations significantly in the transport services. SATS is saying that it will eventually consist of both a private company and a public company. While not being state-run, SATS as a whole will still be a statutory company, and as such it will escape being covered by the Labour Relations Act. Statements like this are completely confusing to the union and to everyone else. But until SATS recognises SARHWU the union will be unable to get clarity.

Crucial in confronting privatisation in the transport sector will be the relationship between SARHWU based in the public sector and TGWU which is based in the private sector. During the Durban strikes, both unions learnt that there is much to be done: while the stevedores who are TGWU members refused to do the work done by the striking SATS workers, there was little if any formal contact between the unions.

Privatisation has serious political implications for the people of South

Africa.

At the moment the S A administration in Namibia is privatising state services and enterprises such as the railways as rapidly as possible. The aim is to strengthen the hand of big business and weaken a future SWAPO government. This experience should serve to remind the progressive movement in South Africa that privatisation does not affect only the workers and unions in the public sector, but all people. ☆

References:

1. SALB Volume 12 No 5 p. 40.
2. J.Nattrass, *Sunday Tribune* 12 April 1987, CSS Labour Statistics, 1987.
3. National Office-Bearers of SARHWU:
President: J Langa;
1st Vice-president: J.Potgieter;
2nd vice-president: T. Majalisa;
Treasurer: E. Sogoni;
General Sec: M. Sebakwane;
Assistant Gen.Sec: D. Moeti.
4. Minutes of meeting between SATS and SARHWU shop stewards, Durban, 31 October 1988.
5. Prof W. Pretorius, RAU Figures mentioned in a talk to the Employer Association.
6. Mr. Nini, GWU member, P.E.Harbour. Quoted in R.White: "An investigation into Labour Relations in SATS: the case of the dispute between the GWU and SATS 1981- 1983." Unpublished Honours dissertation, Rhodes University, p.26.
7. H Shoemann, press release during the strike, 9/9/82. *ibid.* p.56.
8. D.Lewis, *ibid.* p.55.